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Strikes Again

OP-ED COLUMNIST

'The Indigenous American Berserk' Strikes Again

471

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**Bret Stephens**

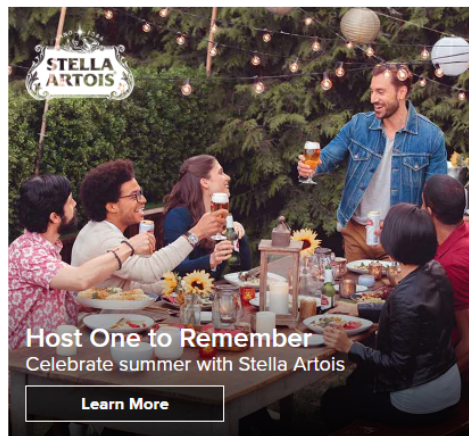
It didn't take long — hours, in fact — after Rep. Gabrielle Giffords was shot, and six others murdered, in Tucson, Ariz., in January 2011, for liberals to begin pinning political blame for the atrocity.

"Giffords' blood is on Sarah Palin's hands," wrote Daily News columnist Michael Daly, noting that the former Alaska governor had put Giffords' district [in a metaphorical cross hairs](#) as a vulnerable Democratic seat.

In Slate, Jacob Weisberg issued a [broader indictment](#), never mind that Jared Loughner was a paranoid schizophrenic of no fixed ideological orientation.

"The Tea Party movement," he wrote, made it "appreciably more likely that a disturbed person like Loughner would react, would be able to react, and would not be prevented from reacting, in the crazy way he did."

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It will be interesting to read what these and other Tea Party-blamers will have to say after Representative Steve Scalise, the G.O.P. whip in Congress, and three others were shot Wednesday morning (another was hit by shrapnel) by a man whose political leanings were considerably more clear than Loughner's.



President Trump after making a statement Wednesday about the shooting in Alexandria, Va.
DOUG MILLS / THE NEW YORK TIMES

"Trump is a Traitor. Trump Has Destroyed Our Democracy. It's Time to Destroy Trump & Co." So wrote alleged shooter James T. Hodgkinson in one social media post in March. He posted a portrait of Bernie Sanders for his Facebook cover photo and was a fan of Rachel Maddow. He belonged to a [Facebook group](#) called

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Hodgkinson had [an arrest record](#) for mostly minor infractions, but showed no sign of mental illness. He was married and sociable. A friend described him as "a nice guy" who was simply "fed up" with the political situation. Who isn't?

Since turnabout is fair play, it's tempting to subject the left to the same tendentious excoriation to which it subjected the right six years ago. Kathy Griffin and a bloodied, decapitated Trump. Trump as Shakespeare's murdered Caesar in Central Park. Kirsten Gillebrand's f-bombs. "The Resistance" — all markers of the same culture of self-righteous loathing that supposedly incubates political violence.

"So much of left-wing thought is a kind of playing with fire by people who don't even know that fire is hot," wrote George Orwell, in a line Weisberg puts to use against the right. Thus then. Thus now.

Or not.

It was foul of the left to accuse the Tea Party of inciting Loughner's rampage — [Bernie Sanders](#) among them — all the more so since evidence for the claim was so strained. That's a lesson that ought to be learned for good now, when there can be no gainsaying Hodgkinson's politics. If Bernie isn't to blame for the shooting now, Palin wasn't to blame then. Belated apologies — or, at least, private regrets — might yet be in order.

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As for the right, they might want to avoid their own politicized analysis of Wednesday's violence, not least because it will come back to haunt them the next time an anti-abortion fanatic shoots his way into a Planned Parenthood clinic or an anti-Muslim bigot stabs people on a train. There are causes that explicitly advocate violence — Islamist extremism, Marxist revolution, white supremacy — and inspire their followers to kill. The Tea Party wasn't one of them during the Obama years. The Resistance isn't one of them today. An outlier here or there doesn't disprove the point.

The reality of much of what passes for political violence in America today is the product of what Philip Roth once called "the indigenous American berserk." Hodgkinson seems a representative type: a relatively normal man, with a seemingly normal life, a bit of a loser, a few axes to grind. Then: Boom. Another awful postal moment, stirred by frustration or loneliness or impulse, loosely yoked to a political cause.

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Surely we could do more to set a different tone in the country: [Paul Ryan](#) made a good start with a unifying speech, as did Nancy Pelosi, Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump. Maybe we also could do more to leaven our politics with intellectual modesty, and a less apocalyptic vision of what might happen if we don't get our way right now. The Trumpian right had this disease in the run-up to the election. His opponents — I don't exclude myself here — have it now. If Wednesday's

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But the fact that events are frightening, bloody and tragic doesn't necessarily make them especially meaningful. Americans are outraged; our politics are angry. It was ever thus. In a nation of 320 million someone fired a gun, shot people and got shot. It shouldn't be like that. It is. As for gun control, we'll learn more about Hodgkinson in the days ahead. But it would take something close to repeal of the Second Amendment to keep someone with his general profile from owning a rifle.

In 2011 the left wanted to blame millions of Americans for the acts of one crazed man. The indictment served nobody. In 2017 the right may seek to do the same. Bad idea. Instead of blaming Sanders and the left, follow the lead of Gabby Giffords: "My heart is with my former colleagues, their families & staff, and the US Capitol Police — public servants and heroes today and every day."

What else, really, is there to say?

Correction: June 15, 2017

An earlier version of this column misspelled the name of a United States senator. She is Kirsten Gillibrand, not Kristen.

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